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## WILLIAM WINTER

BY ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON

IF William Winter had written only his poem "The Ordeal" he would still be entitled to a permanent place in the American anthology. This tribute to Poe, in the measure of the "Adonais," though in fiber by no means either so rich or so imaginative as that masterpiece, has the charming spontaneity and the flowing ease of treatment which one feels in Shelley at his best. In its nineteen stanzas there is not a forced rhyme or a violent fancy, and it has a firmness of lyrical texture which is a trait of Winter's verse. It shows him at his best, and moreover it shows his poetic as contrasted with his sentimental treatment of sorrow.

Mr. Winter's view of life was a very sad one: it may truthfully be said that "Melancholy marked him for her own." This was perhaps partly temperamental, and certainly partly atmospheric, for, born in 1836, he reached his singing youth when Poe and Byron and Tom Moore—or at least the poetic weaknesses of these three bards—were all the fashion. As time passed Winter's imaginary sorrows were followed by family bereavements and (naturally, in the last two decades of a life of eighty years) by the loss of many friends, his deep affection for whom is shown by many elegiac tributes. His collected or "definitive" edition is discouragingly lacking in cheerfulness; but there is a vital difference of art between his two methods of treating of the sad world. In "The White Flag" he writes

Bring poppies for a weary mind  
That saddens in a senseless din  
And let my spirit leave behind  
A world of riot and of sin—  
In action's torpor deaf and blind.

How superior to that is this representative stanza of "The Ordeal":

Close, close around us draws the prison shade  
And ever closer, as our moments glide—  
The iron web of doom ourselves have made,  
By fealty to the power which doth reside  
Within ourselves, not once to be denied,  
Nor curbed, nor conquered. Action doth but make  
A past to be remembered; and the pride  
Of mightiest will that would life's guidance take  
Must, like the frailest heart, at last repine and break.

It is of course legitimate that a poet should write much of sorrow, and his sweetest songs may be those that tell of saddest thought, but unless out of his tears there is distilled an aroma of supernal beauty he is likely to leave us virtually where he found us. The collection of the work of any poet of strong personality accentuates both his weaknesses and his dominant excellences, and in William Winter's case one must be excused for being satiated with sadness and a pessimistic view of "this pagan age." Thus his work is intense rather than comprehensive—the arc subtended by joy, which one craves in verse, being here very small.

But after all the important consideration is, not that a poet has done no poor or negligible work, but that he has added something worth preservation to the world's treasures of song. Winter's verse in review strikes us as having especially two fine qualities—skilled workmanship and a noble tender-

ness. In a time when it is a fad of the lawless and incompetent to disparage technique it is refreshing to see his masterly command of his tools. There are no slovenly phrases, the movement of the thought is natural, the cadences and climaxes are admirable, and there is throughout that fine sense of the appropriate we call taste.

His tenderness comes out in his tributes to friends, chiefly of the stage—among them Henry Irving, John Gilbert, William Warren, Richard Mansfield, John Brougham, Lawrence Barrett, and to the most lovable of all, Joseph Jefferson; to Holmes, Curtis and Stedman, and to those even nearer. This lyric to "Elsie" has a ring of sincerity and abandon:

I know not if thy charm it be  
Or Nature's charm reveal'd in thee;  
Whether thy face, as now I view it,  
Is thine—or her's that's shining through it:  
But this I know—what'er the art  
That wins me, thou hast won my heart!  
And therefore, though my old guitar  
Has strings that were—not strings that are,  
Once more, ere yet its tune be spent,  
I touch that ancient instrument—  
In praise of truth and beauty blent!

Through the red glare, the scorching light,  
The din, the havoc and the blight  
Of clamorous wrath and hideous haste  
That makes this life one dreary waste,  
Thy voice, of Music's soul complete  
Is ever tender, low and sweet—  
To make the frantic tumult cease  
And bless me with the balm of peace!  
And so for thee I breathe a sigh:  
For this I love thee—far or nigh—  
Or else, or else—I know not why!

The close of his elegy on George William Curtis ("Rupert") reflects the poet's talent for friendship and his belief in a future that shall have compensations for the loss and defects of this life:

All my love could do to cheer  
Warmed his heart when he was here.

Honor's plaudit, Friendship's vow  
Did not coldly wait till now.

Oh, my comrade, oh, my friend,  
If this parting be the end,

Yet I hold my life divine  
To have known a life like thine,

And I hush the low lament  
In submission, penitent.

Still the sun is in the skies:  
He sets—but I have seen him rise!

This concluding couplet reminds one of Channing's

If my bark sinks 'tis to another sea

and is one of the few instances in Winter's volume of the surprise of the imaginative flash. Another is in this stanza from "An Ideal":

And her voice is soft and low,  
Clear as music and as sweet;  
Hearing it, you hardly know  
Where the sound and silence meet.

The "Coronal for Stedman" is memorable for its graceful and deserved recognition of that poet-

critic's steadfastness to his art in a lifetime of unpropitious commercial surroundings. It reads in part:

For thou hast kept the faith: thy soul undaunted,  
Whatever storms might round thee rage and roll,  
By one celestial passion still enchanted,  
Has held its course right onward to its goal.

No sordid aim, no worldly greed, beguiling  
Could ever wile thy constant heart astray;  
No vine-clad, Circean, Cyprian Muses, smiling  
Allure thy footsteps down the primrose way.

Thou hast not basely gathered thrift with fawning  
Nor worn a laurel that thou hast not won;  
But in thy zenith hour as in thy dawning  
The good thy nature willed thy hand has done.

There is another poem on the same theme as "The Ordeal" entitled simply "Poe," which is not less poetic, and is a model of compactness and construction, beginning

Cold is the pæan honor sings  
And chill is glory's icy breath  
And pale the garland memory brings  
To grace the iron doors of death.

But, all things considered, the most beautiful lines of William Winter's we know—and among the most beautiful of all the rich product of American poetry relating to the War—are those entitled "My England." They bear witness to the fact that his eightieth year found him still chivalrous in heart and still keen and vigorous in poetic life. It is regrettable that we have only room to quote these stanzas:

My England! Not my native land  
But dear to me as if she were—  
How often have I longed to stand  
With those brave hearts who fight for her!

Bereft by Fortune, worn with Age,  
My life is all I have to give,  
But that I freely would engage  
For those who die that she may live.

Mother of Freedom! Pledge to Right!  
From Honor's path she would not stray,  
But, sternly faithful, used her might  
To lead mankind the nobler way.

Today, when desperate tyrants strain—  
By Greed, and Fear, and Hate combined—  
To blast her power and rend her reign,  
She fights the fight of all mankind:

My England! Should the hope be crossed  
In which she taught the world to strive,  
Then all of Virtue would be lost  
And naught of Manhood left alive.

But 'tis not in the Book of Doom  
That Justice, Honor, Truth should fail:  
The earth be made a living tomb  
And only brutal Wrong prevail.

It can not be the human race,  
Long struggling up to Freedom's sun,  
Is destined to the abject place  
Of vassal to the murd'rous Hun!

My England, *strike!* Droop not, nor pause  
Till triumph on your banners shine!  
Then take a grateful world's applause—  
Millions of hearts that beat like mine.

Robert Underwood Johnson

## TO THE VANQUISHED

Reprint from *Sunshine*

Here's to the men who lose!  
What though their work be e'er so nobly plann'd  
And watched with zealous care;  
No glorious halo crowns their efforts grand—  
Contempt is Failure's share!

Here's to the men who lose!  
If Triumph's easy smile our struggles greet,  
Courage is easy then.  
The King is he who, after fierce defeat,  
Gets up and fights again!

Here's to the men who lose!  
It is the vanquished's praises that I sing,  
And this the toast I choose:  
A hard-fought failure is a noble thing—  
Here's to the men who lose!

Here's to the men who lose!  
The ready plaudits of a fawning world  
Ring sweet in victor's ears.  
The vanquished's banners never are unfurl'd,  
For them there sound no cheers.

Here's to the men who lose!  
The touchstone of true worth is not success—  
There is a higher test—  
Tho' Fate may darkly frown, onward to press  
And bravely do one's best!

George L. Scarborough